



March 9, 2021

We have come a long way in our efforts to end the HIV Epidemic. HIV in America remains a significant public health issue. More than 1.1 million Americans are currently living with HIV and many more are at risk of HIV infection. While new HIV diagnoses have declined significantly from their peak, progress on further reducing them has stalled with an estimated 38,000 Americans being newly diagnosed each year. Without intervention nearly 400,000 more Americans will be newly diagnosed over 10 years despite the availability of tools to prevent transmissions. Additionally, the U.S. government spends \$20 billion in annual direct health expenditures for HIV prevention and care. Today we have the right data, right tools and leadership to end the HIV epidemic.

As part of our efforts, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced a bold plan, Ending the HIV Epidemic: A plan for America (EHE), which is an operational plan to pursue the goals of the initiative to reduce the number of new HIV infections by 75% by 2025 and by at least 90% by 2030. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) also released the HIV National Strategic Plan for the United States: A Roadmap to End the Epidemic 2021-2025 (HIV Plan). The HIV Plan was developed in collaboration with many federal and community partners. This Ending the HIV Epidemic initiative focuses on four key strategies that, implemented together, can end the HIV epidemic in the U.S.: Diagnose, Treat, Prevent, and Respond.

We recognize the essential role of pharmacies and pharmacists in helping us end the HIV Epidemic. Nearly 9 in 10 Americans live within 5 miles of a community pharmacy and pharmacies often have extended hours of operation, accessible locations in communities disproportionately affected by HIV, and non-stigmatizing atmospheres.<sup>1</sup> In addition, pharmacists are trusted healthcare professionals with established relationships with their patients. Pharmacists also have strong relationships with local medical providers and hospitals to refer patients as appropriate.<sup>2</sup> With more than 320,000 pharmacists, working in pharmacies and drug stores, state, local, and private hospitals, and more than 60,000 community pharmacies in the United States, pharmacists are one of the most accessible and trusted providers that could play a pivotal role in our efforts to end the HIV epidemic.<sup>2,3</sup>

The HIV Plan includes explicitly the objective to increase the capacity of health care delivery systems, public health, and the health workforce to prevent and diagnose HIV, and highlights the essential role of pharmacists. Additionally, pharmacists also play a crucial role in the four strategies of Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America, also known as EHE.

- Pharmacists and community pharmacies can be utilized to expand rapid, point-of-care HIV testing in communities. More than 160,000 Americans are unaware they are living with HIV. Early detection through this readily accessible model of HIV testing, coupled with rapid linkage to care or connecting those who test negative to prevention services is critical and can lead to improved individual and community health outcomes in the *'Diagnose'* strategy.

- In addition, studies have shown that engaging pharmacists as a key player in a care team can increase adherence to anti-retroviral therapy and maintain viral suppression. Today, people with HIV who take medication as prescribed and stay virally suppressed have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV to a partner, known as U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable) or TasP (Treatment as Prevention). Utilizing pharmacists in the *'Treat'* strategy to increasing the proportion of people with HIV who are virally suppressed, retain them in care and ensure viral suppression is a key strategy to prevent new HIV transmissions and reduce stigma.

- The accessibility of pharmacists' in urban and rural areas, their knowledge and availability in different practice settings can be leveraged as part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy to expand access to prevention services and improve population health as part of *'Prevent'* strategy. As trusted health care professionals, pharmacists develop a relationship with patients and may be the key to address current disparities in PrEP-prescribing patterns, offer syringe services as well as serve as an essential liaison between patients and other members of the multidisciplinary care team.

- Additionally, pharmacists and pharmacies have played an essential role in the response to the pandemic and can provide quick access to needed prevention and treatment services as part of the '*Response*' strategy to a potential outbreak.

Pharmacists and pharmacies play an essential role in all four key strategies of EHE, including their role to expand awareness, access, uptake, and adherence to effective HIV prevention interventions, improve availability of HIV testing for people with undiagnosed infection or ongoing risk of acquisition, provide linkage to HIV clinical care and support services, expand activities towards retention in care and encourage adherence, and strengthen re-engagement efforts of those that have fallen out of care.

Lastly, Ending the HIV Epidemic is a Whole-of- Society Initiative including State and County Health Departments, HIV organizations, social support agencies, community based organizations, Academic Institutions, the business community and we encourage pharmacists, pharmacies, professional associations, and other stakeholders to look at missed opportunities within their current systems and expand their role to serve their communities. Thank you for your continued partnership in Ending the HIV Epidemic and your role is critical to our success.

Sincerely,

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Resources:

1. CDC Features Get to Know Your Pharmacist; 2. Implementing PrEP in the pharmacy; 3. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/pharmacists.htm#tab>; 4. www.HIV.gov, National HIV Plan.